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House of Representatives

Statement on H.R. 3289, the Iraq/Afghanistan Supplemental Appropriations Act

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Mr. Speaker, last year, during debate on the resolution granting the President the authorization he sought to commence a war against Iraq, I was concerned that the Administration was ignoring the fact that actions and words have consequences. The consequences of our actions then are exactly what we are trying to address through H.R. 3289 today. We took the burden of a notoriously ill-advised, preemptive war and placed it on the shoulders of our young men and women in the military to carry virtually alone. Now we are asking the American taxpayers to take on the burden almost exclusively of rebuilding an entire nation, while our own nation finds its schools in disrepair, forty-four million Americans without health care, and our homeland security needs underfunded.

If this were a spending package focused on supporting and protecting our troops, this would be an easy vote for me. Nearly 5 months after the Commander-in-Chief declared, “mission accomplished,” too many of our troops are dying daily. I do not think these young men and women in the armed forces, National Guard, and Reserves expected to still be there so long after our President’s proud and premature declaration of success in Iraq. Our soldiers are sacrificing too much: some their lives, and others their valued role as a parent, breadwinner, or caregiver to their families and their communities.

I would support whatever it takes to bring these young men and women home as quickly as possible, and to ensure their success and safety in their mission while they are away. But even the portion of the bill that would support our military’s “post-war” efforts in Iraq is deficient. We know from reports that weapons caches are poorly secured and that our troops are lacking absolutely vital equipment such as body armor. The bill also would leave 80% of our troops in Iraq without the ability to ensure a clean water supply for themselves. We should also be paying for our soldiers’ rare calls home and for the full cost of traveling home while on leave. Equally disturbing are reports that our troops in Iraq are fatigued and suffering from low morale, the direct consequence of the Administration’s failure to secure extensive international cooperation and compose a comprehensive exit strategy.

A significant portion of this bill’s \$87 billion is for rebuilding Iraq, and like it or not we now have a moral responsibility to carry much of this burden. When scrutinized in the light of day, however, many of the items for which the Administration is asking us to sign away precious tax dollars simply do not make sense. I was appalled by findings reported in the New York Times that Halliburton has been exploiting the American taxpayer with a 140% mark-up for a gallon of gas in Iraq. Despite our best efforts today to include some Congressional oversight to the contracting process, I am afraid that the Administration and its representatives in Iraq will continue to oppose sensible oversight even while they have compiled a very poor track record of ensuring that the largesse of the American taxpayer

will not further be abused. As an example of what is already occurring on the ground, I would reiterate what the Democratic members of the Appropriations Committee reported about the reconstruction of a cement factory in Northern Iraq. In that instance, after the American contractor estimated that it would take \$15 million to upgrade the factory, local Iraqis got the job done for \$80,000. Something is wrong here, and I do not believe we have done enough to make sure the Administration does not continue to make these mistakes.

I understand the overwhelming pressure to rebuild as quickly as possible, but we cannot afford to do this at any cost and without greater discipline.

The American people know that this will not be the only request on their tax dollars – some have characterized the President’s \$87 billion request as a mere down-payment in a rebuilding effort that I expect to be long and very expensive. I am heartened that our international allies are starting to offer help, but these agreements should have been taken care of long ago through a collaborative international partnership. Again, the consequence of acting alone and without credible evidence has come back to haunt not just the President, but America’s soldiers and taxpayers.

Having said all of this, the most troubling aspect of this bill before us today is that it is not paid for at all; the full amount is added to this year’s already alarming \$500 billion deficit. Why? We have been told that the funds are simply not available. Why not? In large part it is because of the cost of the excessive tax cuts benefiting the wealthiest among us that this Administration decided were its first priority. The 2001 repeal of the estate tax alone – which benefits 30,000 of America’s wealthiest individuals and only them, at the expense of more than 140,000,000 other taxpayers – costs more in two years than this entire appropriations package.

Mr. Speaker, this is a policy with no fiscal discipline that stands in stark contrast to the discipline and sacrifices our young men and women are demonstrating every day in Iraq and Afghanistan.

I sincerely wish I could have voted for the amendment offered by the gentleman from Wisconsin (Mr. Obey) that would have met the burden that we have assumed in Iraq in a responsible way. I do not understand why the leadership denied us the ability to vote on that amendment, which would have reset our priorities in a very sensible manner, asking Americans to heed the call of shared sacrifice and asking the wealthiest 1% of Americans to give up just a little bit of their tax cut to help bring our troops home and rebuild Iraq.

What the Administration has asked us to do here today – approve deficit spending in the amount of \$87 billion – will place the cost of rebuilding Iraq and Afghanistan squarely on the shoulders of our children and grandchildren and those of our soldiers, too many of whom have already made the ultimate sacrifice. We should be more responsible than that. I will vote against H.R. 3289.